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‘Inter-Asia’ through Inland Eyes: Afghan Trading Networks across Land and Sea

MAGNUS MARSDEN *

This article demonstrates the significance of long-distance networks formed by traders from Afghanistan and Central Asia to the forging of present-day transregional connections within Asia. It identifies two connective corridors authored by these traders: a ‘Eurasian corridor’ connecting East Asia to post-Soviet Eurasia and extending into Western Europe and a ‘West Asian corridor’ involving traders originally from Central Asia linking East Asia to Turkey and the Arabian Peninsula. Empirically, the paper documents and analyses the varying cultural and political orientations of traders operating along these networks, and ways in which specific nodes in the networks contribute to their activities as a whole. Conceptually, the papers suggest that the study of ‘inter-Asian’ connections stands to benefit from deploying oceanic and inland models of geography in a non-dichotomous manner.

Keywords: Afghanistan, trading networks, the Silk Road, Eurasia, West Asia

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Introduction

The trope of the Silk Road has grown in stature in scholarship on Asia, most recently in the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative but before 2014 in relation to the USA's 'New Silk Road' project. Yet there is now growing recognition of the extent to which the emphasis placed by scholarship upon 'state-driven, state-centric and state-controlled' visions of regional connectivity has silenced the significance of lived forms of Eurasian connections which both predate megaprojects and, indeed, are also threatened by them.¹ Building on work that is sceptical of the benefits of analysing Eurasian connections in all their diversity through the lens of megaprojects, the vantage point taken in this article on transregional connections is not that of China's policymakers, but of traders from Afghanistan - one of the world's most turbulent countries. I conducted fieldwork between 2009 and 2019 with Afghan traders in Afghanistan but also in the vibrant commercial nodes in which they operate. I spent time with and interviewed traders in their shops and warehouses in Kabul, offices in China's 'international trade city' of Yiwu, as well as in wholesale markets in West Asia (especially Jeddah, Dubai, and Istanbul) and the container markets of post-Soviet Eurasia (Odessa, Moscow, and St Petersburg). In this article, I analyse two major corridors of Afghan trade and mobility in Asia that I identified during my fieldwork: a 'Eurasian corridor' that connects post-Soviet Eurasia to China via the Muslim-majority republics of Central Asia; and a 'West Asian corridor' that links Turkey, the Arabian Peninsula, and Central Asia in a triangle.

I deploy the notions of Eurasia and West Asia not as fixed geographical categories but, rather, as overlapping and dynamic spatial scales that are shaped, constituted, and conceived of by the actors upon whom I focus in the article.² Historians have developed new approaches to the study of the 'Eurasian arena' in recent years that do not treat the region as a fundamentally unitary 'civilisation'.³ Eurasia, they show is helpfully conceptualised as a 'crossroads' of imperial, economic, and cultural interaction – interactions that resulted in both significant connections and commonalities but also powerful disconnections and divergences.⁴ Describing and analysing the experiences of

¹ Willem Van Schendel, "Fragmented Sovereignty and Unregulated Flows: The Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Corridor," in *Shadow Exchanges along the New Silk Roads*, eds. Hung, Eva and Tak-Wing Ngo (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 39. Till Mostowlansky, and Hasan Karrar, "Assembling Marginality in North Pakistan," *Political Geography* 63 (2018): 65-74. See also Alessandro Rippa, *Borderland Infrastructures: Trade, Development, and Control in Western China* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020).

² Nile Green, "Rethinking the 'Middle East' After the Oceanic Turn," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34, no 3 (2014): 556–564.

³ Chris Hann, "A Concept of Eurasia," *Current Anthropology* 57, no 1 (2016): 1-27.

⁴ A. Khazeni, *Sky Blue Stone: The Turquoise Trade in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 8-9.

mobile traders from Afghanistan, the networks they form, and the multiple inter-Asian commercial nodes in which they operate, illuminates the vitality of the commercial activities, histories, communities, and geographies of trading networks in present-day Eurasia.⁵ Beyond pointing to the role of in-land transregional commercial networks, groups, and mobilities in the shaping of localities, of cultural flows, and of conceptions of place and identity across Eurasia, I seek to make a contribution in two ways. First, I identify the arenas emerging from such forms of collective activity as overlapping and flexible Soviet, post-Soviet, and Turko-Persian Islamic iterations of Eurasia. Second, I point towards the insights that explorations of the nodes at which terrestrial and oceanic models of geography converge and interact can bring to the understanding of inter-Asian connections. In particular, I question the tendency in the literature to privilege inter-Asian connections made visible through models of geography conceptualised in relation to the Indian Ocean. I suggest, instead, the value of deploying geographical models in a non-dichotomous manner and argue that doing so brings attention to the relationships between oceanic and inland connections. In this sense, the article seeks to move the study of Asian connections beyond both models of inland crossroads and expansive oceans.

Silk Road Studies in the Context of the 'Oceanic Turn'

The relative paucity of scholarship on the social dimensions of regional connections has arisen not only as a result of contemporary geopolitical projects of Eurasian 'connectivity' – a term widely used in the literature to identify a key ideological aspect of geopolitical projects, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative.⁶ For the past two decades, much scholarship in the social sciences on connections between different parts of the world has fixated either on the relationship between 'the local' and 'the global' or on the transnational connections linking different nation states. An outcome of this body of

⁵ An extensive body of literature explores the role played by 'ethnic' networks in cross-cultural trade. Much of this body of literature dwells on the significance of shared cultural and religious identities in fostering the forms of trust on which the conduct of long-distance trade depended. This article seeks to build on this literature by suggesting that the ability of traders to respond to changing geopolitical contexts is also a central facet in communities' success in trade. See, classically, Philip Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). On the significance of ethnic communities to the economy of post-Soviet Russia, see Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). For an examination of the activities of Afghan traders in comparison to other communities active in long-distance trade across space and time, see Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2016.

⁶ See James Sidaway et. al, "Politics and spaces of China's Belt and Road Initiative," *EPC: Politics and Space* no 38 (2020): 795 – 847.

work on ‘globalisation’ is that comparatively little attention has been paid to historically durable expressions of transregional connections in particular contexts.⁷ An exploration of transregional forms of connections that persist over time is not merely an empirical addition to work on globalisation but, rather, of wider theoretical significance. Focusing on transregional connections challenges both the tendency to view geographical connectivity through the lenses of the nation-state (an approach widely referred to as constituting ‘methodological nationalism’) and in terms of culturally homogenous and geographically simplistic ‘areas’ (an approach that emerged in the USA in the context of the interwar and Cold War periods).⁸ Transregional connections simultaneously criss-cross nation-states and narrowly conceived cultural areas, illustrating that ‘society was never neatly contained within defined territorial units’ and pointing to the ways in which ‘regions are fluid and interconnected, rather than fixed and self-contained’.⁹ The study of transregional dynamics reveals more dynamic, fine-grained, and flexible articulations of culture, economics, politics, and society than those developed by scholarship working in relationship to abstract models of “globalization’, the nation-state, and culturally defined ‘areas.’¹⁰

Recent scholarship on oceanic arenas – most especially that of the Indian Ocean – has been a powerful force in literature that seeks to transcend the limitations of both methodological nationalism and the area studies paradigm. Global historians now widely conceive oceans not as empty expanses of water but as full of ‘promise’ for the analysis of geographical ‘connections, circulations, and entanglements.’¹¹ Scholarship on oceanic arenas has contributed in a significant way to the development of a new and dynamic approach to the study of regions that has contested the findings of older work in world history which tended to analyse space and culture in terms of distinct ‘static geographic and civilizational containers.’¹² Besides enabling an approach that is critical of conventional understandings of territorial and cultural boundaries, oceanic models of geography have also made it possible for historians and scholars in related disciplines

⁷ Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens: Cosmopolitan Society and Cultural Change in Massawa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁸ A. Wimmer and N. Glick-Schiller, “Methodological Nationalism and Beyond: Nation-State Building, Migration and the Social Sciences,” *Global Networks*, no 2 (2002): 301-344; David Price, *Cold War Anthropology: The CIA, the Pentagon, and the Growth of Dual Use Anthropology* (Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016); Zachary Lockman, *Fieldnotes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁹ C.B. Huat et al, “Area Studies and the Crisis of Legitimacy: A View from South East Asia,” *Southeast Asia Research* 27, no. 1 (2019): 31-48, 40.

¹⁰ Engseng Ho, “Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 9 (2017): 907-928.

¹¹ F.A. Bishara, “The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr: Unfurling the Gulf in the Age of Oceanic History,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 52, no. 3 (2020): 397-412.

¹² Bishara, “The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr,” 398.

to make a political contribution and to 'push against ... discourses of nativism' in the settings upon which they work.¹³

Work on the Indian Ocean has been of especial significance to the field of 'inter-Asian' studies – an approach developed by scholars such as Engseng Ho that seeks to 'open up' the study of regions and to treat them not as 'self-contained and understandable in and of themselves' but as 'nodes' and 'interfaces' that enable, anchor, and channel complex circulations of people, things, ideas, and institutions.¹⁴ Scholarship across the social sciences and humanities has brought attention to the role played by this vast expanse of water in connecting societies, cultures, and politics in an arena that stretches from East and Southeast Asia to South Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern and Southern Africa.¹⁵ A significant theme evident in much work across this field of study concerns the flexibility and diversity of the identities of the arena's 'circulatory' and 'mobile' 'societies.'¹⁶

Three reasons help to explain the particularly prominent role played by the Indian Ocean in the emergence of an interdisciplinary body of work focused on inter-Asian connections. First, inland Asia's modern territorial boundaries have drawn much attention among scholars, especially those working in 'frontier zones' and 'borderlands':¹⁷ connections and circulations in the Indian Ocean arena made visible by anthropologists and historians have thus acted as an important counterpoint to work underscoring – even in the context of 'globalisation' – the power and pervasiveness of Asia's territorial boundaries. Secondly, for many years the rise of European imperialism was held by historians to have resulted in an expansion of maritime commerce at the expense of overland trading routes¹⁸ – this line of argument made the study of ports, and, eventually, the oceans to which they were connected, an especially prestigious zone of scholarship.¹⁹ Ultimately, however, it contributed to oceans coming to be regarded as a unique type of arena in which to highlight transregional connections and the role of these in anti-colonial projects that directly contested the static and bounded conception

¹³ Bishara, "The Many Voyages of Fateh Al-Khayr," 398.

¹⁴ On the significance of the Cold War to the emergence of the area studies paradigm see, Huat, "Area Studies and the Crisis of Legitimacy," 38.

¹⁵ Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹⁶ Engseng Ho, *Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ E.g. Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

¹⁸ Niels Steensgard, *The Asian Trade Revolution: The East India Companies and the Decline of the Caravan Trade* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975). Cf. Ron Harris, *Going the Distance: Eurasian Trade and the Rise of the Business Corporation, 1400-1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

¹⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, "Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989):267-306.

of the nation-state and culture area. Critical engagements by scholars of Asia concerned with contemporary expressions of US imperialism in the Indian Ocean rim further intensified this trend.²⁰ Thirdly, the specific physical attributes of in-land Asia – notably its high mountains and deserts zones – have long been regarded in scholarship and popular discourse alike as a barrier to rather than interface with neighbouring regions. By contrast, a new generation of scholars seeking to challenge rigid understandings of space, culture, and identity have argued that the ‘smoothness of the ocean’ facilitates an approach to place that brings into view transregional circulation, connection, and entanglement.²¹

A series of recent studies, however, have been critical of the general tendency of scholars to privilege oceanic connections over land-based connections in their models of ‘inter-Asian’ dynamics.²² At one level, much recent work on the Indian Ocean takes its inspiration from Amitav Ghosh’s historical novels, and has resulted in accounts of the ‘cosmopolitanism’ and distinctiveness of the Indian Ocean world.²³ As Nile Green has argued, however, many of these accounts tend to privilege elite expressions of universalising cosmopolitanism and political projects that prioritise inclusive identities. Often neglected, by contrast, are more layered, protean, and exclusive political projects and identities that were simultaneously fashioned in the Indian Ocean arena yet by non-elite actors working in vernacular languages.²⁴

At another level, recent scholarship by historians of Central Asia has questioned the depth and nature of the decline of inland trade and the connected assumption that the region was peripheral to global history after the decline of ‘the Silk Road’ in the sixteenth century. This body of work has resulted in scholarship illustrating the significance of Central Asia to global political and economic developments: trading nodes and routes remained a vital aspect of the region’s political economy until at least the end of the nineteenth century.²⁵ Ethnographic and historical studies have also challenged the tendency to treat deserts and high mountain ranges as barriers to transregional connections, showing instead how a range of inland contexts within and

²⁰ Engseng Ho, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 46, no. 2 (2004): 210 – 246.

²¹ See Paul Anderson, “Aleppo in Asia: Mercantile Networks between Syria, China and Post-Soviet Eurasia since 1970,” *History and Anthropology* 29 (2018): 67 – 83, p. 70.

²² In his stimulating article on the study of inter-Asia, Engseng Ho includes a passing discussion of land based connections, see: Ho, “Inter-Asian Concepts for Mobile Societies,” 917.

²³ Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra, *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

²⁴ Nile Green, “The Waves of Heterotopia: Toward a Vernacular Intellectual History of the Indian Ocean,” *The American Historical Review* 123 no. 3 (2018): 846–874.

²⁵ See: Scott C. Levi, *The Rise and Fall of Khoqand, 1709–1876: Central Asia in the Global Age* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2017) and Scott C. Levi, *The Bukharan Crisis: A Connected History of 18th Century Central Asia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2020).

beyond Asia acted as interfaces between regions.²⁶

In this wider context, several works by historians have gone beyond abstract and aggregate models of 'the Silk Road': they have developed, instead, a 'Eurasian geographical frame' that brings together regions (Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East) hitherto treated as distinct 'civilisations'.²⁷ This approach emphasises the 'interlinked and entangled' histories of Eurasia while also seeking to avoid the tinge of romanticism seen in work on the Indian Ocean arena by recognising that 'encounters and interactions could often lead to disconnections and constructions of difference'.²⁸ Especially important to this body of historical work is the portrayal of 'fine-grained' pictures of the 'people, places, contradictions, and experiences' that informed the make-up of specific networks which played a critical role in facilitating commercial, cultural, and intellectual exchanges in modern Eurasia.²⁹ In addition to a long-standing emphasis on the role played by ties of trust and the collective mechanisms developed and deployed by networks to enforce shared standards of behaviour across long distances, work on Eurasian's connective networks also emphasises the flexible cultural forms developed by mobile Asians working along overland routes to communicate in complex multilingual and multicultural worlds. In particular, analysis of *lingua francas*, notably Persian, by traders and other mobile people -- regardless of their specific cultural, religious, and regional identities and backgrounds -- has brought much-needed attention to the cultural sophistication of inland Asia's 'mobile societies'.³⁰

Historically, successful Eurasian empires provided the conditions that enabled inland and oceanic arenas to be linked to one another.³¹ Recent studies of the Silk Road in Central Asia have also argued that the 'dichotomy between overland and maritime trade... is a false one': networks 'thrived', rather, by linking together the bustle of the

²⁶ E.g. G. Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth-Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); James Pickett, *Polymaths of Islam: Power and Networks of Knowledge in Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

²⁷ Paul Anderson, "Not a Silk Road: Trading Networks between China and the Middle East as a Dynamic Interaction of Competing Eurasian Geographies," *Global Networks* no. 20 (2020): 208-724.

²⁸ Lale Can, *Spiritual Subjects: Central Asian Pilgrims and the Ottoman Hajj and the End of Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

²⁹ Can, Lale, *Spiritual Subjects*.

³⁰ See, programmatically, Nile Green ed., *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2019).

³¹ Di Cosmo argues that the success of the Pax Mongolica was its ability to provide the conditions to link the inland Eurasian arena with the maritime Mediterranean world via the Genoese and Venetian trading colonies of the Black Sea. See, Nicola Di Cosmo, "Mongols and Merchants on the Black Sea Frontier in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Convergences and Conflicts," in *Turco-Mongol Nomads and Sedentary Societies*, ed. R. Amitai and M. Biran (Leiden: Brill: 391-424, 2005). See also Nicola Di Cosmo, "Black Sea Emporia and the Mongol Empire: A Reassessment of the Pax Mongolica," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, no 53 (2010): 83-108.

maritime entrepot with the vast resources of the hinterland.³² Leading scholars of the Indian Ocean are also increasingly reflecting on the need to recognise the arena's position in relationship rather than opposition to inland contexts.³³ In the empirical sections that follow, I point toward similarities between the networks of Afghan traders and those documented by historians. These are visible in terms of the importance to the networks of trust, of the mobility of commercial personnel, and of the anchoring nodes that enable the fashioning of shared sensibilities, social reproduction, and the circulation across long distances of critical information about commerce, politics, and the reputation of traders.³⁴ More importantly, however, is the extent to which a key aspect of the networks made-up of traders from inland Asia is the flexible, shifting, and heterogeneous nature of their identities.

Having discussed broader developments in the study of Central Asia, 'inter-Asia', and globalisation, I now outline and compare the Eurasian and West Asian corridors of connectivity.

The Eurasian Connective Corridor

A regional context in which Afghan traders have demonstrated themselves as being especially adept operators is the former Soviet Union-what I refer to here and elsewhere as the Eurasian connective corridor.³⁵ Mobile Afghans in Central Asia are largely viewed by officials from the region and beyond either as costly refugees or terrorists/criminals. In recent years, policy relating to Afghan traders has been confused. States in the region have introduced policies specifically targeting the commercial activities of Afghan traders. Less frequently, policy-makers have sought to encourage Afghan merchants to invest in the commercial and agricultural sectors of their countries, as in Uzbekistan today.

Afghan commercial networks in the post-Soviet space were established by Soviet-sympathising Afghans who studied in Soviet universities, technical institutes, and party

³² Levi, *The Bukharan Crisis*, 113.

³³ Jonathan Miran, *Red Sea Citizens*; Ulrike Freitag, *A History of Jeddah: The Gate to Mecca in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³⁴ Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a case study in Afghanistan, see: Ali Karimi, 'The Bazaar, the State and the Struggle for Public Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan,' *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society*, no. 3 (2020): 1-21. Cf. David Sebouh Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

³⁵ Magnus Marsden, *Beyond the Silk Roads: Trade, Mobility and Geopolitics across Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

schools during the 1970s and 1980s.³⁶ These students engaged in petty trade on the side. They dealt in foreign currency and clandestinely sold Indian-made cloth and jeans from Hong Kong to Soviet citizens. On home visits to Afghanistan, they transported air conditioning units made in Azerbaijan as well as Russian-made teapots. Such goods also found their way to Pakistan along established smuggling networks.

The trading activities of these twentieth-century Afghan students built, however, on a deep knowledge of the historical trade in Muslim Central Asia and Eurasia. Various Afghan networks—including those made of up Sikhs and Hindus but also those connected to Central Asian Muslims—had been active in the trade between Iran, British India, China and Central Asia/the Russian Empire, stretching as far as Murmansk.³⁷

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Afghan traders helped to ensure that the populations of the Soviet Union's successor states received basic foodstuffs. They exported to Central Asia foodstuffs manufactured in Iran and Pakistan. In the same years, they also played a very significant role in the wholesale market of Chinese commodities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Doing so involved establishing trade routes between China and the post-Soviet states, interacting with officials, and negotiating market access with other influential trading communities, especially Azerbaijanis and other commercially active and politically influential groups from the Caucasus. The success the traders had in establishing such routes ensured a significant degree of path dependency. Their knowledge of such routes and relationships with officials working along them enabled the traders to import commodities to Russia and Ukraine in bulk and at low costs. Given the ongoing preference of consumers for affordable commodities in the context of economies characterised by low salaries and repeated periods of economic crisis often resulting from political conflict and instability, Afghan traders were able to maintain a foothold in the region's wholesale markets even after the transition to market economies. Today, approximately 100,000 traders and workers of Afghan origin work in markets across the formerly Soviet countries.³⁸

Afghans also moved to the former Soviet space after the US-led invasion of the country in 2001 and officially registered themselves as refugees. Some found informal employment in the region's "container markets" as "sellers" for the established Afghan merchants; others brought US dollars earned by working with foreign armies, establishing partnerships with settled Afghans. Such activities continue to be important for the region's economies today, although in some settings – such as Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – new legislation has curtailed the scope of Afghan businesses.

³⁶ For a detailed account, see Marsden, *Trading Worlds*.

³⁷ See Stephen Dale, *Hindu Merchants and Eurasian Trade, 1600–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

³⁸ Given that the traders work informally, accurate statistical data is not available as to the precise number of traders or the volume of commodities in which the deal.

After the Eurasian Customs Union was launched in 2015, Afghans began shipping goods to Russia and Belarus using Kazakhstan's port and rail network. They are now diversifying their range of activities: supplying raw material (such as Russian wood pulp) to paper factories in Afghanistan and exporting goods (such as Moldovan wine and Ukrainian sunflower oil) to China.

For such networks to function, merchants cultivate and sustain close relationships with regional officials. Such relationships help to insulate traders at times of political sensitivity. As a trader remarked to me in Yiwu in January 2018, "We Afghans have lots of experience of states grabbing our money. That's why the only people who invest in China are those who know officials in high places who are ready to inform them of new policies coming our way."

Afghan merchants operating in this expansive context communicate with one another in Farsi and Pashto. But they are always fluent in both Central Asia's Turkic and Persian languages, as well as Russian, and often also Mandarin or Cantonese. Pointing to such skills, they often refer to themselves as 'diplomats'. Their cultural and linguistic versatility and skills in informal diplomacy have occasionally been latched upon by authorities in the countries where they work. An Afghan trader in Ukraine was said to have helped secure the release of Ukrainian citizens captured by the Taliban. In China, a trader from Afghanistan in Yiwu was elected as representative of the city's 13,000 or so foreign traders.³⁹ He is now a regular feature at official meetings organised by the city's municipal government and widely featured on Chinese television.

States have also recognised the geopolitical potentials of working with this group of savvy traders. Russian officials see their relationships with Afghan traders as being important in geopolitical terms. Most recently, for example, the Russian authorities have sought to benefit politically and in the field of international politics from their close relationship with Afghan traders based in the country. Against the backdrop of negotiations between the US and the Taliban relating to attempts to arrive at a political settlement, a conference at a hotel in Moscow run by the Kremlin brought together prominent Afghan politicians and representatives of the Taliban. Official news reports in Russia and in the international media claimed that the event had been organised by an Afghan diaspora organisation in Russia. The Russian state was clearly seeking to distance itself from hosting and directly organising the conference for geopolitical reasons. Afghanistan's government and various international actors were suspicious of the event: Ashraf Ghani (the Afghan President) argued that the delegates at the conference were not representatives of Afghanistan and therefore had no capacity to represent the country officially. Even in the context of such strategic geopolitical moves,

³⁹ Approximately 1000 traders of Afghan background maintained a permanent or semi-permanent presence in Yiwu during the period of time over which I conducted fieldwork in the city (2013 – 2019).

the readiness of Russian officials to present the country's Afghan diaspora organisation in such a manner illustrates a close relationship built up with a mobile community over decades. The conference also reveals the degree to which influential officials in Russia regard Afghan traders as being able to reliably play critical if informal diplomatic roles.

Islam is an important aspect of the organisational activities of Afghans in Eurasia but the role it plays in their networks is contested and variable rather than monolithic. This is significant given the analytical weight often invested by scholars of 'the new Silk Road' on Islam's significance to the coherence of trading networks comprising people of Muslim background.⁴⁰ The contested significance of Islam in the dynamics and identities of Afghan trading networks in post-Soviet Eurasia reminds us of the dangers of assuming that mobile Muslims inevitably express commitment to 'global Islam'.⁴¹ Afghan traders, indeed, regularly distance themselves from global Islam in a conscious manner and regard doing so as being central to their ability to navigate between competing geopolitical projects of Eurasian connectivity.

Afghans working in formerly Soviet Eurasian contexts today do regularly emphasise the extent to which they have are more religiously observant Muslims today than during the years in which they studied in Soviet institutes, as well as in the period at which they embarked on lives of traders in the years following 1991. Traders often remark to one another that far fewer of their compatriots drink alcohol today than in the past. Afghans have also established institutions at which religious rituals and gatherings are conducted in the cities in which they are based: rooms are set aside within markets to act as prayer spaces for Muslim merchants. In the Ukrainian city of Odessa, for example, there are two mosques largely attended by Afghans based in the city. In both mosques, Afghans gather collectively to perform Friday prayers and organise important ritual events, especially feasts held to mark the deaths of traders in Odessa and their relatives beyond.

Yet the social institutions established by Afghans in Odessa and of importance to their collective commercial activities are not 'Islamic' in a simple sense. A well-known trader in the city from northern Afghanistan, for example, used a considerable sum of his own money to purchase land close to the 7km market on which he built a large structure, ostensibly, at least, for benefit of the community. The concrete structure houses a large mosque on the ground floor, and an airy hall is decorated with wall paintings of important figures and landmarks from Afghan history, and a 'hotel' on the third. As one trader in his late forties who lives in Odessa remarked to me wilyly, 'People couldn't work out whether it was a mosque or whether it was a discotheque'.

⁴⁰ For example, see: B. Simpfordorfer, *The New Silk Road. How a Rising Arab World is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁴¹ On the distinction between global Islam and mobile Muslims, see Nile Green, *Global Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Let me briefly summarise the arguments made thus far concerning the Eurasian connective corridor and the role of Afghan traders within it. I have emphasised the complex and diverse identity formations of the traders, the ways in which their activities connect a range of settings between China and the formerly Soviet countries, and the circulatory patterns of mobility in which they participate. The traders construct their identities in relation to a capacious understanding of being Afghan which is inclusive of Afghanistan's ethno-linguistic and ideological diversity. Islam plays a powerful and important role in traders' daily lives and self-identities yet it in a manner that privileges their ability to immerse themselves in the contexts in which they live, in terms of both their trading activities and their social relationships, especially marriage. Collective Afghan identity in the Eurasian corridor, indeed, is often fashioned in opposition to forms of Muslim thought and identity they regard as being rigid and exclusivist. As Paul Anderson has recently argued in an analysis of Aleppo, the Eurasian corridor demonstrates that 'not all expansive formative connections need to be formulated through the medium of the ocean.'⁴²

The 'connective corridor' that connects China to West Asia on which I focus in the next part of the article requires traders to fashion very different identities and institutions to those important in Eurasia.

The West Asian Connective Corridor

On a hot and humid day in the Chinese trading city of Yiwu located in Zhejiang province, I visited the trading office of Abdul Rahman. Abdul Rahman is an ethnically Turkmen trader who holds Afghan citizenship and operates a trade and transport business largely serving visiting businessmen and women from the post-Soviet state of Turkmenistan. Abdul Rahman has never visited Turkmenistan yet his Turkmen ethnicity means that he is able to speak Turkmeni and this enables him to work with traders from the country with ease. Brought up in a largely Turkmen village in north-western Afghanistan, he left the country with his family as a teenager, initially moving to the city of Peshawar in north-west Pakistan, and occasionally spending time working in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Like many other Afghan Turkmen, in Pakistan the family established a business trading in carpets hand-woven by Afghan refugees. Later in the 2000s, Abdul Rahman left Pakistan with his family. They joined several Afghan Turkmen families in the Gulf city of Sharjah, opening an office that provided trading and transport services to merchants from Turkmenistan. In the context of a steep decline in this trade, resulting from changing import duties in Turkmenistan, Abdul

⁴² Anderson, "Aleppo in Asia," 21.

Rahman relocated his commercial activities to Yiwu. Rising costs in the UAE, also led him to move his wife and children to Istanbul: he secured for them residency permits by renting an apartment in Zeytinburnu, a neighbourhood in which several members of his community (including an elder brother) lived. As we chatted in Yiwu about trade and family life, Abdul Rahman pulled from a draw in his desk a partially consumed bottle of Chinese red wine: he had been entertaining Chinese business people in his flat the night before, he told me, but, being Muslim, did not drink: 'take it, and finish it,' I was instructed.

The second key human-commercial corridor I explore in this article brings to light the activities of traders originally from the border regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia who currently live and work in West Asia's greatest religious, commercial, and political centres: Istanbul and Jeddah. Transnational communities and networks of Central Asia are playing an important role in creating transregional connections across multiple West Asian contexts – they also link these connections to settings in East Asia. The activities of merchants identifying themselves as Central Asian in the great port cities of West Asia also reveal the convergence of a 'net of connections over sea and land' to mobile societies – an aspect of the dynamics of such settings that is largely overlooked in historical and anthropological work framed in relation to the 'oceanic turn'.⁴³

While official statistics do not exist on the number of such Afghan traders of Central Asian background working as traders and in related fields (retail, labour, and service provision) in West Asia, a reasonable estimate would be between 30,000 and 40,000 individuals. Most of these traders, including Abdur Rahman, claim descent from families who lived in the emirates of Central Asia until they emigrated across the border to Afghanistan in the 1920s against the backdrop of persecution by the Bolsheviks – as a result, they often refer to themselves as 'Bukharan' rather than 'Afghan'.⁴⁴ These Bukharan émigrés lived in northern Afghanistan until the early 1980s. Between the 1920s and 1970s, they were active in the country's industrial and commercial sectors — especially in the fur and carpet businesses — and played a leading role in the development of modern industry in the country. Elite Central Asian families enjoyed close ties to Afghanistan's urban elite and achieved high-level positions in government. Some of such elite families began to leave Afghanistan for Saudi Arabia, Europe, and the United States after the 1973 coup d'état that resulted in the overthrow of Afghanistan's monarchy.⁴⁵

⁴³ Freitag, *A History of Jeddah*, 19.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Nazif Shahrani, "Pining for Bukhara in Afghanistan: Poetics and Politics of Exilic Identity and Emotions" in *Reform Movements and Revolutions in Turkistan 1900-1924: Studies in Honour of Osman Khoj* ed. Kocaoglu, Timur (Haarlem, Netherlands: SOTA, 2001), 369-391.

⁴⁵ For background on the community and its migratory trajectories, see Audrey Shalinsky, *Long Years of*

After the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, thousands of less wealthy émigré families fled to Pakistan, fearing that their lands and capital would be confiscated by the communist regime in Kabul. While community elders supported various anti-Soviet mujahidin organisations, many migrated so that their children could evade conscription, both by the mujahidin and into the Soviet army. In Pakistan, they continued to be active in the Central Asia carpet manufacture and trading industry. In the late 1980s, hundreds of these families moved from Pakistan to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia: Central Asians had lived in the Bukhariyyah neighbourhood of Jeddah since at least the 1850s (acting as pilgrimage guides) and these historic communities were joined by a later flow of Central Asians in the 1920s (fleeing the Bolshevik revolution).⁴⁶

The Central Asian émigrés who arrived in Jeddah in the 1980s rapidly established themselves in Jeddah as well as in Mecca and Medina. They initially filled niches in the economy that had been vacated by earlier waves of Central Asian migrants, most especially restaurants selling a popular Saudi dish, *ruḥ al bukhari* (bukhari rice). They then became active in the import from Turkey and subsequently China of machine-made prayer carpets and cheap ready-made clothing, both items that hajjis visiting Saudi Arabia and overseas labourers living in the country purchase as gifts to take home.

The kafala system — whereby foreign businesses must be registered in the name of a Saudi sponsor (kafeel)— means that conducting business in Saudi Arabia is inherently risky for foreigners (*ajnabi*).⁴⁷ As a result, successful émigré merchants in Saudi Arabia moved their capital to Turkey and bought homes in Istanbul's Zeytinburnu neighbourhood — a site of Central Asian community life in Turkey from the mid -20th century onwards. Increasingly, they invested in new developments that have sprung up under the regime of President Tayyip Erdoğan. Rising living expenses in Saudi Arabia, partly arising from the 'family tax' introduced in 2016, resulted in many Saudi-based Afghans closing their business in the kingdom. Those with sufficient capital secured access to Turkish residency permits and sometimes citizenship. Less wealthy members of the community relocated to Kazakhstan (under the country's *oralman* scheme) or returned, after nearly thirty years, to Afghanistan.

The institutional life of Central Asia's emigres also plays a major role in facilitating the ability of individuals and families to secure access to citizenship and residency rights in Turkey. Associations (*dernigi*) established by Afghans in Istanbul are frequently founded in relationship to an explicitly ethno-linguistic Turkic identity, most conventionally that of 'Afghan Turk'. Turkey has for long had close relations with Afghanistan's Turkic speaking communities — in the 1980s several thousand Afghans were granted residency

Exile (Washington: University Press of America, 1993).

⁴⁶ Can, *Spiritual Subjects*.

⁴⁷ E.g. Andrew Gardner, "Strategic Transnationalism: The Indian Diasporic Elite in Contemporary Bahrain," *City and Society*, no. 20 (2008): 54-78.

and citizenship rights in Turkey on the basis of their being Uzbek and Kirgiz-speaking 'Turks.' A central aspect of Turkey's foreign policy in the twenty-first century has been the so-called 'pivot to the East' – this policy placed on rebuilding relationships with contexts that were formerly part of or in a close relationship with the Ottoman Empire. Afghanistan's Central Asian emigres have increasingly aligned themselves with Turkey's Look East policy: the granting of Turkish citizenship to them is widely regarded as reflecting their Turkic ancestry and claims to the Ottoman imperial legacy. 'Afghan Turk' associations are widely regarded as playing an important role in shaping the ability of Afghans registered with them to reside legally or semi-legally in Turkey. Several Central Asian emigres based in Istanbul told me that community organisations (*dernigi*) play an important role in mediating the citizenship and residency applications of Afghans in the city, especially those claiming Turkic forms of ethnic identity.

Afghan traders in West Asia, like those active along the Eurasian corridor, are culturally and linguistically versatile. They are at home across the Muslim societies of South and Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, as well as Turkey. They speak Arabic, Persian, Central Asian Turkic languages, and modern Turkish. Those who travel to China for trade also often speak fluent Mandarin and/or Cantonese. Many are fluent in Urdu.

There are, however, critical limits to the type of worlds across which they traverse. In contrast to the Afghan networks in Eurasia, the émigré traders in West Asia often remark that their people chose to live in Saudi Arabia because there are few greater blessings than living close to the sacred cities of Mecca and Medina. They also say they are most content in countries where they can 'hear the call to prayer.' The importance of religion to the collective identities of traders active in this corridor is also visible in the institutions it establishes and maintains. The community also continues to act as the safeguards of religious institutions that have a long history in West Asia as being central for the performance and maintenance of Sufi rituals and communities of commensality: Sufi lodges referred to as *tekke* in Turkish or *taqiya khana* in Farsi. Historically, such *tekke* were established as a form of *waqf* (charitable donations of land or buildings) using funds from wealthy merchants.⁴⁸

Across both the Eurasian and West Asian connective corridors, traders value the traits of cultural and linguistic versatility. In both of these corridors, newer geographies of trade and community overlay multiple layers of past commercial activity. There are also important differences in the dynamics of these two corridors: in contrast to the secular national identities of traders in the Eurasian corridor merchants operating in the West Asian corridor emphasise the centrality of Islam to their identities.

⁴⁸ For a historical account of a Central Asian *tekke* in Istanbul, see Grace Martin Smith, "The Özbek Tekkes of Istanbul," *Der Islam*, no 57 (1980): 130–39.

Trading families have for centuries circulated between Central Asia, the Arabian peninsula and Anatolia. An understanding of the connective geographies authored by these families requires a model of geography that privileges neither the oceanic nor the terrestrial. Instead, this connective corridor illuminates the role played by particular merchant networks and communities in connecting oceanic and inland arenas to one another.

Conclusion

By bringing attention to the flexible identities of mobile traders who identify with the inland settings of Afghanistan and Central Asia, and to the way in which they forge transregional connections, circulations, and entanglements, the article has sought to contribute to the wider literature within and beyond the expanding field of ‘inter-Asian’ studies. A great deal of recent work by historians and anthropologists documenting Asian connections and advancing alternative models of ‘inter-Asia’ has focused on the Indian Ocean arena. By contrast, scholars working on inland Asian contexts have tended to dwell on the study of borders and boundaries. These studies have shown how territorial boundaries have been rigidified in recent decades, often in the context of the so-called ‘War on Terror’. Furthermore, infrastructural projects – including the Belt and Road Initiative – that ostensibly seek to enhance the scope of ‘connectivity’ have been shown to reduce the scope for socially rich forms of connection and exchange. Against this backdrop, the capacity of ‘traditional’ modes of inter-Asian commerce to persist in Asia is being questioned; this has critical implications not only for the livelihoods of inland Asians but also for the transregional worlds they create and inhabit.

This article has pointed to the existence of two key corridors of Afghan mobility that are disconnected and characterised by contrasting cultural and political priorities and outlooks of those who make them up. Importantly, the connective corridors outlined in the article are not the only form of trading networks of importance to Afghan mobile traders – as I have documented elsewhere, a diverse range of smaller and more dispersed networks are also important elements of the collective activities in Asia and beyond of merchants from Afghanistan.⁴⁹ The networks that operate across Asia today are historically layered. Their shape and structure reflect modern geopolitical projects, but also the ongoing significance of past geopolitical and commercial arrangements. The networks thus enfold, paper over, and mediate between multiple projects of Eurasian connectivity across both space and time. Rather than approaching history as a sequentially unfolding series of stages, understanding the influence of Eurasian projects

⁴⁹ Magnus Marsden, “Actually Existing Silk Roads,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 8 (2017): 22-30.

of connectivity on trading networks requires an approach towards time that is layered, overlapping, and interpenetrating.⁵⁰ Traders working in the markets of Eurasia today are not the archaic hangovers or survivals of earlier modes of organising economic activity that were surpassed by commercial developments forged in Europe. Rather, studying them reveals the ways in which multiple histories are interleaved in an overlapping way in the trading networks. In addition to thinking about time in a manner that does not take periods for granted, understanding trading networks such as those explored above also requires a conceptualisation of their relationship to space that emphasises the forms of circulatory rather than 'transnational' forms of mobility inherent to them. In relation to the case of the networks of Central Asians in West Asia, I have also suggested that neither models of geography based on the trope of the 'inland crossroad' nor the 'smooth ocean' do justice to the traders' capacity to work across and between territorial and oceanic contexts.

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⁵⁰ Shahzad Bashir, "Rethinking Chronology in the Historiography of Muslim Societies," *History and Theory* 53, no 4 (2014): 519-544.

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